

Agriculture, Ecosystems and Environment

A predator in need is a predator indeed: generalist arthropod predators function as pest specialists at the late growth stage of rice

--Manuscript Draft--

Manuscript Number:	AGEE36058
Article Type:	Research Paper
Keywords:	biocontrol; trophic interactions; generalist predators; rice paddy; organic and conventional farms; stable isotope analysis
Manuscript Region of Origin:	TAIWAN
Abstract:	<p>Biocontrol, using natural enemies for pest control, has a long history in agriculture. It has received a surge of interest in the recent Anthropocene because of its potential as a valuable tool for sustainable agriculture. To solve a long-standing puzzle in biocontrol—how well the ubiquitous generalist arthropod predators (GAPs) function as biocontrol agents—this study aimed to 1) quantify the diet composition of GAPs at each crop stage using stable isotope analysis, 2) examine the consistency of GAPs in pest consumption over years, and 3) investigate how abiotic and biotic factors affect the diet composition of these predators. Specifically, we sampled arthropod prey and GAPs in sub-tropical organic and conventional rice farms over crop stages (seedling, tillering, flowering, and ripening) in three consecutive years. Among our field-collected samples, 352 arthropod predator and 828 prey isotope samples were analyzed to infer predator-prey interactions. Our results show the following: a) The proportion of rice pests in GAPs' diets in both organic and conventional farms increased over the crop season, from 23-47% at the tillering stage to 79-95% at the ripening stage, across the three study years. The high percentage in pest consumption at late crop stages (flowering and ripening) suggests that GAPs can function as specialists in pest management during the critical period of crop production. Regarding individual predator groups, spiders and ladybeetles exhibited distinct dietary patterns over crop stages. b) The high pest consumption by GAPs at late crop stages was similar across years (with different climatic conditions), suggesting a consistency in GAP feeding habits and biocontrol value. c) The proportion of rice pests in GAPs' diets varied with farm type and crop stage (e.g., higher in conventional farms and during flowering/ripening stages). By quantifying the diet composition of GAPs over crop stages, farm types, and years, this study reveals that generalist predators have potential to produce a stable, predictable top-down effect on pests under various environmental conditions. As sustainable agriculture has become increasingly important, incorporating the ubiquitous generalist predators into pest management will likely open a promising avenue towards this goal.</p>

Highlights

- We analyzed arthropod isotope samples in organic/conventional rice farms
- Generalist arthropod predators (GAPs) act as pest ~~specialists~~ at late crop stages
- The high pest consumption by GAPs is consistent across years (climates) and farms
- The results lend ~~supports~~ to applying GAPs as biocontrol agents in agroecosystems

Submission type: Research article

~~**A predator in need is a predator indeed: generalist arthropod predators
function as pest specialists at the late growth stage of rice**~~

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Abstract

Biocontrol, using natural enemies for pest control, has a long history in agriculture. It has received a surge of interest in the recent Anthropocene because of its potential as a valuable tool for sustainable agriculture. To solve a long-standing puzzle in biocontrol—how well the ubiquitous generalist arthropod predators (GAPs) function as biocontrol agents—this study aimed to 1) quantify the diet composition of GAPs at each crop stage using stable isotope analysis, 2) examine the consistency of GAPs in pest consumption over years, and 3) investigate how abiotic and biotic factors affect the diet composition of these predators. Specifically, we sampled arthropod prey and GAPs in sub-tropical organic and conventional rice farms over crop stages (seedling, tillering, flowering, and ripening) in three consecutive years. Among our field-collected samples, 352 arthropod predator and 828 prey isotope samples were analyzed to infer predator-prey interactions. Our results show the following: a) The proportion of rice pests in GAPs' diets in both organic and conventional farms increased over the crop season, from 23-47% at the tillering stage to 79-95% at the ripening stage, across the three study years. The high percentage in pest consumption at late crop stages (flowering and ripening) suggests that GAPs can function as specialists in pest management during the critical period of crop production. Regarding individual predator groups, spiders and ladybeetles exhibited distinct dietary patterns over crop stages. b) The high pest consumption by GAPs at late crop stages was similar across years (with different climatic conditions), suggesting a consistency in GAP feeding habits and biocontrol value. c) The proportion of rice pests in GAPs' diets varied with farm type and crop stage (e.g., higher in conventional farms and during flowering/ripening stages). By quantifying the diet composition of GAPs over crop stages, farm types, and years, this study reveals that generalist predators have potential to produce a stable, predictable top-down effect on pests

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44 *Keywords: biocontrol, trophic interactions, generalist predators, rice paddy, organic and*
45 *conventional farms, stable isotope analysis*

1. Introduction

Using natural arthropod enemies for pest control has a long history in agriculture. The earliest record of biocontrol was documented in the book *Plants of the Southern Regions* (ca. 304 A.D.). It described people in Southern China selling ants and their nests (attached to branches) in the markets to control citrus insect pests (Huang and Yang, 1987). Nevertheless, with the advent of modern technologies in the past century, synthetic pesticides have become the main method for controlling pests in agriculture. However, this comes at a cost, such as posing risks to people, reducing biodiversity (e.g., a decline in top predators) and hampering ecosystem functions (e.g., a decline in pollinator service) (Geiger *et al.*, 2010; Kehoe *et al.*, 2017). As agriculture has become the largest land use type worldwide and a major driver for the global biodiversity crisis and environmental degradation in Anthropocene (Campbell *et al.*, 2017), a shift from synthetic pesticides to environmentally friendly practices (e.g., biocontrol) is urgently needed to make agriculture more sustainable (Gomiero *et al.*, 2011). For example, the European Commission has announced its plan to reduce the use of chemical pesticides in European Union agricultural systems by 50% by 2030 (European Commission, 2020). To achieve this ambitious sustainability goal, biocontrol by natural enemies has been considered a key approach and has regained importance in modern agriculture.

Natural enemies used for pest control can be classified into two major groups based on their prey range: specialist and generalist predators. While specialist predators (e.g., parasitoid wasps) have been widely advocated in agriculture because they target specific pest species and produce less undesirable non-target effects (Stiling and Cornelissen, 2005), generalist predators (e.g., spiders) have been increasingly appreciated for their conspicuous existence and consistent biocontrol effect on pests (Symondson *et al.*, 2002; Stiling and Cornelissen, 2005; Michalko *et*

al., 2019; Hsu *et al.*, 2021; Gajski *et al.*, 2023). For example, generalist predators were commonly reported in various agro-ecosystems and significantly reduced pest abundance in approximately 75% of cases in 181 field manipulative studies (Symondson *et al.*, 2002). Moreover, a meta-analysis suggests that generalist predators may exert stronger biocontrol effects on pest populations over time compared to specialists (~~Stiling and Cornelissen, 2005~~).

While the value of generalist predators has been increasingly appreciated, a few fundamental knowledge gaps need to be filled to ~~validate~~ their biocontrol potential and the underlying mechanisms in agro-ecosystems. For example, while studies have qualitatively analyzed the diets of generalist predators (e.g., using molecular gut content analysis to identify prey species) (Eitzinger and Traugott, 2011; Ingrao *et al.*, 2017; Albertini *et al.*, 2018), very few have quantified their diet composition over a growth season in the field (knowledge gap 1) (Hsu *et al.*, 2021; Otieno *et al.*, 2023). Quantifying their diet composition will provide critical information to address the concern that generalist predators may switch their diet from pests to alternative prey and thus reduce their pest control effectiveness (Michalko *et al.*, 2019). For instance, if generalist predators still consume a high proportion of pests in their diet with the presence of alternative prey in the field, this result would help end a long debate on whether generalist predators serve well as biocontrol agents (Symondson *et al.*, 2002; Krey *et al.*, 2017; Michalko *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, examining the consistency of generalist predators in pest consumption in the field over years is important to assess the reliability of these predators as biocontrol agents in agriculture, although this information is lacking (knowledge gap 2). Given that dynamics in population density or species composition commonly occur in agro-ecosystems (Settle *et al.*, 1996; Dominik *et al.*, 2018), a consistently high pest consumption by generalist

predators over years, if it occurs, will provide strong support for applying these predators in pest management programs.

To better understand the underlying mechanisms for the biocontrol effect of generalist predators, we also need to examine how various abiotic and biotic factors affect the diet composition of generalist predators in agro-ecosystems (knowledge gap 3). First, arthropod community composition (e.g., pest vs. alternative prey density) may vary with crop stages over the growth season and affect predator-prey trophic interactions (Roubinet *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, we should examine how crop stage affects the pest consumption by generalist predators to understand whether the role of these predators as biocontrol agents varies within a growth season. Second, we should examine whether farming practices (e.g., organic and conventional) influence the diet composition of predators (e.g., pest consumption) (Birkhofer *et al.*, 2011). This will demonstrate whether generalist predators provide varying biocontrol values in specific farm types. For examples, compared to conventional farming, organic farming may promote arthropod diversity (Bengtsson *et al.*, 2005), potentially lowering the pest consumption by generalist predators if predators shift their diet towards alternative prey. In contrast, the application of synthetic chemicals in conventional farms may promote pest abundance (Hardin *et al.*, 1995; Settle *et al.*, 1996; Birkhofer *et al.*, 2008a; Guedes *et al.*, 2016), potentially leading to higher pest consumption by predators. Third, we should investigate the relationship between the relative prey abundance and the diet composition of their predators. This will clarify whether pest abundance or predator preference mainly explains the pest consumption by predators (Wise *et al.*, 2006; Kuusk and Ekbom, 2012; Roubinet *et al.*, 2017; Eitzinger *et al.*, 2017). Lastly, we should examine how surrounding vegetation (e.g., forest cover) affects the diet composition of generalist predators. While surrounding vegetation reportedly affected arthropod diversity and

predator-prey interactions in agro-ecosystems (Altieri and Letourneau, 1982; Altieri, 1999; Barbosa and Castellanos, 2005; Diehl *et al.*, 2013; Lichtenberg *et al.*, 2017), its effect on predators' diet composition is unclear. Understanding this will provide insights for managing the agricultural landscape and promoting biocontrol services by generalist predators.

To address these three knowledge gaps, this study aimed to 1) quantify the diet composition of generalist predators, 2) examine the consistency of predators in pest consumption over years, and 3) investigate how abiotic and biotic factors affect the diet composition of these predators. Filling these gaps will provide insights for applying generalist predators in biocontrol programs. Specifically, this study sampled arthropod prey and generalist arthropod predators (GAPs) in sub-tropical organic and conventional rice farms over the rice growth season (seedling, tillering, flowering, and ripening stages) in Miaoli County, Taiwan from 2017 to 2019. The objectives of this study were to 1) quantify the diet composition of GAPs (ladybeetles and spiders) at each rice stage using stable isotope analysis ($\delta^{13}\text{C}$ and $\delta^{15}\text{N}$), 2) examine GAPs' consistency in pest consumption over years (i.e., the proportion of rice pests in GAPs' diets in 2017-2019), and 3) investigate how local abiotic and biotic factors (e.g., farm type, crop stage, percent forest cover, and the relative abundance of pests in the field) may affect pest consumption by GAPs. Stable isotope analysis has been widely applied in ecology to infer predator-prey trophic interactions and estimate the proportion contribution of different prey sources to predators' diets (Post, 2002; Boecklen *et al.*, 2011; Layman *et al.*, 2012). This quantification method reflects accumulated prey consumption in predators' diets, which may not be achieved by some "snap-shot" techniques (e.g., field observations and molecular gut content analysis) (Newton, 2016).

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study system and sample collection

We collected terrestrial arthropods in organic and conventional rice farms in subtropical Taiwan from 2017 to 2019 (three farms each in 2017 and seven farms each in 2018 and 2019). These farms (120.656-120.721 °E; 24.364-24.489 °N), averaged at 0.2 hectares, were irrigated with surface water. The organic farms were managed with organic fertilizers (manure; 2-3 applications/crop season) and natural pesticides (tea saponins; 1 application/crop season). The conventional farms were managed with synthetic nitrogen fertilizers (2-3 applications/crop season) and organophosphate pesticides (1 application/crop season). At each major rice crop stages (seedling, tillering, flowering, and ripening stage) during the growing season (April - July) in each study year, we collected arthropod samples by sweep-netting (36 cm in diameter with a mesh size of 0.2×0.2 mm) the crop canopy 60 times along the farm ridge. Samples were sealed in bags without chemical preservatives, iced, and transferred to refrigerator (-20°C) in the laboratory. We identified and counted arthropods under a dissecting scope to the lowest possible taxonomic level. Main orders, families, and genera have been documented in Hsu et al. (Hsu et al., 2021).

2.2. Stable isotope analysis of arthropod samples

After identification, arthropod samples were prepared for stable isotope analysis. First, samples were oven dried (50°C) for one week, ground, and weighed into individual tin capsules (5×9 mm). If necessary, several conspecifics would be pooled into a capsule to meet the minimum weight required for stable isotope analysis (i.e., 2 mg in this study). Stable isotope analysis (352 arthropod predator and 828 prey isotope samples) was conducted at the UC Davis

Stable Isotope Facility using a PDZ Europa ANCA-GSL elemental analyzer interfaced to a PDZ Europa 20-20 isotope ratio mass spectrometer (Sercon Ltd., Cheshire, UK). The standards for carbon and nitrogen stable isotope ratios were Vienna PeeDee Beleminte and atmospheric N₂, respectively. The results of our samples were expressed in per mil (‰) relative to the international standards ($\delta^{13}\text{C}$ and $\delta^{15}\text{N}$).

2.3. *Arthropod trophic guild assignment*

~~A trophic guild represents a group of species using similar resources and forms a basic component of food webs. The concept has been proved to be practical in current ecology because it condenses broad taxonomic information into distinct functional groups in communities (Blondel, 2003).~~ In this study, we classified arthropod samples into four trophic guilds based on their dietary information and isotope signatures : 1) “Predators” consisted of spiders and ladybeetles, which are the ~~primary GAPs in rice farms.~~ 2) “Rice herbivores” consisted of major rice pests, including planthoppers, leafhoppers, and stink bugs. 3) “Tourist herbivores” consisted of herbivorous species without direct trophic association with rice plants, including some grasshoppers and leaf beetles. 4) “Detritivores” consisted of arthropods that feed on decaying organic material or plankton, including various midge and fly species. The arthropod families/genera in each trophic guild are detailed in Appendix A: Table S1. This study focused on the trophic interactions between generalist predators and their prey sources and therefore did not consider less abundant trophic guilds (e.g., parasitoids) in subsequent analyses.

2.4. *Data analyses*

To quantify the diet composition of predators, we constructed a Bayesian stable isotope mixing model using the R MixSIAR package (Stock and Semmens, 2016) to estimate the proportions of different prey sources (i.e., the three prey guilds including rice herbivores, tourist herbivores, and detritivores) in predators' diet. In the mixing model, individual farm-year combination and crop stage were included as fixed effects for predator isotope data to examine their effects on predators' diet composition; isotope data for the three prey guilds were pooled respectively to generate fixed source values due to their high mobility across farms (Mazzi and Dorn, 2012; Sun *et al.*, 2015). Isotope data at the seedling stage for the three study years were omitted from the analysis due to insufficient sample sizes for model estimation. To improve our model estimates, carbon and nitrogen concentration dependencies as well as the residual/process errors were incorporated (Phillips and Koch, 2002; Stock and Semmens, 2016). Trophic discrimination factors (TDFs) were estimated from the diet-dependent discrimination equation proposed by Caut *et al.* (2009). We ran three Markov Chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) chains, each with 50,000 iterations and a burn-in number of 25,000, along with a non-informative Dirichlet prior. Chain convergence was assessed via Gelman-Rubin and Geweke diagnostics. Bayesian posterior mean estimates of diet composition (for each farm-year-stage combination) were extracted for further analysis.

To examine how local abiotic and biotic factors (e.g., farm type, crop stage, percent forest cover, and the relative abundance of pests in the field) may affect the pest consumption by GAPs, we first fit beta regression models with year, farm type, crop stage, percent forest cover, and the relative abundance of rice herbivores as fixed effects without interactions and the proportion of rice herbivores consumed in predators' diet as the response variable using the R betareg package (Zeileis *et al.*, 2016). We then refit the first model by adding the interaction

terms among all the significant factors to create the final model. Model parameters were estimated using maximum likelihood, and their significance was analyzed using the “Anova” function in the R car package (Fox and Weisberg, 2018). Tukey’s post-hoc tests were performed for the significant factors using the “cld” function in the R emmeans package (Lenth and Lenth, 2018). Note that the percent forest cover around each study farm was estimated from Google Earth images by manually delimiting the forested areas within a 1-km radius circular buffer surrounding the farm and computing the fraction of these areas in the buffer zone. Because spiders and ladybeetles were the most abundant generalist predator groups in our study system and exhibited distinct foraging behavior (e.g., sit-and-wait vs. active hunting), we also performed all the aforementioned analyses separately for each of the two predator groups. All analyses were conducted in R version 4.0.3 (R Core Team, 2021).

3. Results

3.1. Diet composition of predators in rice farms

Across organic and conventional farms during 2017-2019, the proportion of rice herbivores in all predators’ diet increased over the course of the crop season from 23-47% at the tillering stage to 79-95% at the ripening stage; the proportion of detritivores in predators’ diet decreased from 38-59% at the tillering stage to 1-2% at the ripening stage; the proportion of tourist herbivores in predators’ diet also decreased from 15-22% at the tillering stage to 4-19% at the ripening stage (Fig. 1a; Appendix A: Table S2).

Regarding individual predator groups, spiders and ladybeetles showed a marked difference in their diet composition over crop stages during 2017-2019. Across organic and conventional farms, spiders consumed a higher proportion of detritivores (33-55%) in their diet

in the beginning of crop season (tillering stage) and substantially increased the consumption on rice herbivores to 78-94% in late crop season (ripening stage) (Fig. 1b; Appendix A: Table S2). In contrast, ladybeetles in both organic and conventional farms consumed a low proportion of detritivores ($\leq 17\%$) and a steadily high proportion of rice herbivores ($\geq 74\%$) in their diet throughout the crop season (Fig. 1c; Appendix A: Table S2). For both predator groups, tourist herbivores generally did not constitute an important prey source and contributed less than 33% to the predators' diet (Fig. 1b, 1c; Appendix A: Table S2).

3.2. Patterns of rice herbivore consumption by predators

We further analyzed rice herbivore consumption by GAPs since these herbivores are the main pests of concern. The patterns of rice herbivore consumption by all predators in organic and conventional rice farms were generally similar across the three study years, suggesting consistency in GAPs' feeding habits (Fig. 2). The consistency in herbivore consumption over years was also revealed by our beta regression model, which indicated that the proportion of rice herbivores consumed in all predators' diet did not vary across years ($\chi^2 = 1.99$, $P = 0.37$; Table 1).

Interestingly, spiders and ladybeetles exhibited distinct within-season patterns of rice herbivore consumption. For spiders in organic and conventional farms, the proportion of rice herbivores in their diet increased toward later crop season, ranging from 20-48% (tillering) to 78-94% (ripening) (Fig. 2b; Appendix A: Table S2), whereas for ladybeetles in organic and conventional farms, the proportion of rice herbivores in their diet remained relatively stable throughout the season, ranging from 74-85% (tilling) to 93-95% (ripening) (Fig. 2c; Appendix A: Table S2).

3.3. Factors associated with rice herbivore consumption by predators

The proportion of rice herbivores in GAPs' diet differed between organic and conventional farms (All predators: $\chi^2 = 15.98$, $P < 0.001$; Spiders: $\chi^2 = 13.38$, $P < 0.001$; Ladybeetles: $\chi^2 = 6.70$, $P = 0.001$; Table 1). Specifically, all predators consumed a higher proportion of rice herbivores in their diet in conventional vs. organic farms (Tukey's post-hoc test, $P < 0.05$; Table 2), although spiders' diet was affected by a farm type-year interaction ($\chi^2 = 7.64$, $P = 0.02$; Table 2).

The proportion of rice herbivores in GAPs' diet also differed among crop stages (All predators: $\chi^2 = 227.93$, $P < 0.001$; Spiders: $\chi^2 = 115.43$, $P < 0.001$; Ladybeetles: $\chi^2 = 152.60$, $P < 0.001$; Table 1). Specifically, GAPs consumed higher proportions of rice herbivores in their diet at the flowering and/or ripening stage vs. the tillering stage (Tukey's post-hoc test, $P < 0.05$; Table 3).

Different from previous studies showing the importance of surrounding landscape in determining arthropod community structure and pest control by predators (Rusch *et al.*, 2016), but see (Karp *et al.*, 2018), this study found no correlation between proportion of rice herbivores in GAPs' diet and the percent forest cover within a 1-km radius buffer surrounding the study farms (All predators: $\chi^2 = 0.30$, $P = 0.58$; Spiders: $\chi^2 = 1.28$, $P = 0.26$; Ladybeetles: $\chi^2 = 0.77$, $P = 0.38$; Table 1). Furthermore, the proportion of rice herbivores consumed was not associated with the relative abundance of rice herbivores in the field (All predators: $\chi^2 = 0.36$, $P = 0.55$; Spiders: $\chi^2 = 1.38$, $P = 0.24$; Ladybeetles: $\chi^2 = 0.93$, $P = 0.33$; Table 1).

4. Discussion

Because the worldwide demand for environmentally friendly practices in agriculture has increased, we investigated the potential of GPs (ubiquitous in nature) as biocontrol agents in agro-ecosystems. Specifically, we used stable isotopes to quantify the diet composition of GPs in organic and conventional rice farms during the crop season in three consecutive years. Our main results include the following: 1) Across the three study years, the rice herbivore consumption by GPs increased in both organic and conventional farms over the crop season, from 23-47% at the tillering stage to 79-95% at the ripening stage (Fig. 1a). The high percentage at the ripening stage indicates that GPs could function as specialists in pest management during critical growth (late crop) stages. Notably, rice herbivore consumption by spiders increased gradually toward the later crop season (Fig. 2b), whereas the consumption by ladybeetles remained stable throughout the season (Fig. 2c). 2) Our results revealed similar among-year patterns in rice herbivore consumption by GPs in organic and conventional rice farms, suggesting a consistency in GP feeding habits and biocontrol value (Fig. 2, Table 1). 3) The proportion of rice herbivores in GPs' diets varied with farm type and crop stage (e.g., higher in conventional farms and during flowering/ripening stages). However, contrary to results from previous studies, pest consumption by GPs was not associated with surrounding landscape (e.g., percent forest cover) or the relative abundance of rice herbivores in the field (Table 1). We discuss in the following: 1) GPs function as specialists at late crop stages, 2) GPs exhibit consistent pest consumption patterns over years, 3) factors associated with pest consumption by predators, and 4) the potential caveats of this study. We finish by highlighting the implications of our results for agricultural management.

4.1. Generalist predators function as specialists at late crop stages

While biocontrol, a farming practice with a long history, offers a promising solution for sustainable agriculture, the use of GAPs as biocontrol agents remains a concern because GAPs may switch diets between pests and alternative prey (Albajes and Alomar, 1999; Prasad and Snyder, 2006; Roubinet *et al.*, 2018). This study addressed this concern and revealed a consistency in high pest consumption by GAPs at late crop stages over years. The results provide not only strong support for using GAPs in sustainable pest management, but also a novel aspect in biocontrol—generalist predators may function as specialist predators of pests during the late crop season. Specifically, across the three study years, GAPs in both organic and conventional farms consumed an increasing proportion of rice herbivores over the crop season, reaching 79-95% in predators' diet at the ripening stage, whereas the proportions of alternative prey (detritivores and tourist herbivores) in their diet gradually decreased below 21% at the ripening stage (Fig. 1, Appendix A: Table S2). The increase in rice herbivore consumption over time suggests that the biocontrol potential of predators increases toward late crop stages and peaks at the critical stage of crop production. This could be because of a higher herbivore (pest) density at late crop stages, suggested by a correlation between rice herbivore consumption and crop stage (see *Factors associated with pest consumption by predators*).

While GAPs consumed a high proportion of pests at late crop stages, the two predator groups in our study system, spiders and ladybeetles (Table S1), exhibited distinct dietary patterns over the crop season (Fig. 1, Fig. 2). Specifically, pest consumption by spiders increased substantially, but pest consumption by ladybeetles remained stable over the season (Fig. 2b vs. 2c). This may be because different foraging modes—sit-and-wait (spiders) or actively hunting (ladybeetles)—can lead to different prey capture and thus diet composition (Nyffeler, 1999; Klecka and Boukal, 2013). For example, long-jawed orb-weavers (*Tetragnatha*), the most

abundant genus in our spider samples, are sit-and-wait predators. The diet composition of these predators generally reflects prey availability (Nyffeler, 1999). In fact, spiders' diet composition appeared to correlate with prey abundance in this study (Fig. 1b, Fig. 3), although crop stage, rather than pest abundance, better predicted the pest consumption by predators (see *Factors associated with pest consumption by predators*). In contrast, ladybeetles are actively hunting predators and may preferentially feed on rice herbivores, resulting in stable pest consumption over time (Fig. 1c, Fig. 2c, Fig. 3). Because predator foraging modes shape predator-prey-plant interactions (Schmitz, 2008), we suggest future studies to examine different assemblages of sit-and-wait vs. actively hunting predators in field conditions to reveal the most efficient biocontrol practice over the entire crop season.

4.2. Generalists exhibit consistent pest consumption patterns over years

Ideal biocontrol agents provide a consistent, predictable effect on pests under various environmental conditions. Accordingly, GAPS in this study showed consistent pest consumption across years (Fig. 2), despite various abiotic and biotic environmental conditions. Specifically, regarding the abiotic factors, the daily mean temperature, particularly from April to June, varied substantially among years (Appendix A: Fig. S2). The daily precipitation also fluctuated over the three study years, with multiple high precipitation events in 2017, overall low precipitation in 2018, and relatively uniform precipitation in 2019 (Appendix A: Fig. S2). Regarding the biotic factors, the composition of rice herbivores at the flowering and ripening stages differed substantially among the three years, in particular the two most dominant groups: leafhoppers (Cicadellidae/*Nephotettix*) and planthoppers (Delphacidae/*Nilaparvata*) (Appendix A: Table S3). Although both abiotic and biotic factors varied substantially over the years of our study, pest

consumption by GAPs generally remained stable, suggesting that GAPs can be a predictable, valuable tool for pest control in sustainable agriculture (but see Eitzinger *et al.*, 2021).

4.3. Factors associated with pest consumption by predators

The proportion of rice pests in GAPs' diets differed between farm types and among crop stages but was not associated with the percent forest cover surrounding the farms or the relative abundance of rice herbivores in the field (Table 1). Overall, GAPs in conventional farms consumed a higher proportion of rice pests in their diet compared with those in organic farms (Table 2). There may be two explanations for this: 1) Organic farming may promote arthropod diversity and therefore distract predators from feeding on target pests (Bengtsson *et al.*, 2005; Birkhofer *et al.*, 2008b; Lichtenberg *et al.*, 2017). 2) Pest densities may be higher in conventional farms (Porcel *et al.*, 2018), thus leading to higher predator-prey encounter rates and pest consumption by GAPs. Regardless of the potential mechanisms, our results highlight the important but overlooked biocontrol value of GAPs in conventional farming systems.

Besides farming practices, the crop stage also affected pest consumption. Overall, pest consumption by GAPs increased from early (tillering) to late (ripening) stages (Fig. 2, Table 3), consistent with previous studies where predators consumed more pests in the late crop season (Roubinet *et al.*, 2017; Hsu *et al.*, 2021). The underlying mechanisms in our study may be summarized as follows: low pest density at the early crop stage led to low pest consumption by GAPs; however, pest populations increased with rice development and eventually predominated, leading to high pest consumption by GAPs at the flowering and ripening stages (Fig. 2 and 3). These findings indicate a higher biocontrol value of predators during the middle and late crop seasons, when the crop production is most vulnerable to pest damage. Therefore, farming

practitioners may want to avoid practices that harm predators (e.g., chemical applications) during this period to maintain healthy predator populations and associated ecosystem services.

While ~~habitat structure~~ (e.g., surrounding vegetation) critically affects predator abundance and diversity (Altieri and Letourneau, 1982; Altieri, 1999; Diehl *et al.*, 2013; Lichtenberg *et al.*, 2017), its effect on the diet composition of predators remains unclear. Complex surrounding vegetation has been suggested to promote predator abundance and diversity (Langellotto and Denno, 2004; Diehl *et al.*, 2013), but such higher complexity did not affect predators' diet composition in our study (Table 1). This might be because the prey species in our study system were mostly associated with rice plants but not the surrounding vegetation, consistent with a meta-analysis where habitat complexity had no effect on crop herbivore densities (Langellotto and Denno, 2004). Nevertheless, increasing vegetation complexity remains an important topic because it could benefit pest control by enhancing predator density and diversity.

Notably, although the diet composition of generalist predators correlated with prey availability in the field (Wise *et al.*, 2006; Hsu *et al.*, 2021), our beta regression model suggests no such correlation between rice herbivores and GPs (Table 1). An explanation is that the relative abundance of rice herbivores was highly correlated with crop stage, a significant factor likely associating with various covariates (e.g., rice plant height) and explaining most variations (Fig. 3, Table 1). We encourage further experiments, both observational and manipulative, to clarify the link between prey availability and generalist predators' diet composition in the field.

4.4. Potential caveats of this study

Our study demonstrates high pest consumption by GAPs in rice fields over three years and examines the factors influencing GAPs' diet composition. While our study provides evidence for GAPs' biocontrol potential, some caveats may exist. First, high pest consumption in GAPs' diets does not necessarily imply a strong suppression of pest populations in the field, since pest population dynamics depend not only on the per capita effect of predators but also predator density and diversity (Letourneau *et al.*, 2009; Rusch *et al.*, 2016). To unveil the connection between per capita pest consumption and overall pest dynamics, future work may require complementing stable isotope analysis with field observations of predator and pest populations. Second, while intra-guild predation potentially influences the pest control by GAPs (Straub *et al.*, 2008; Michalko *et al.*, 2019), it was not accounted for in our diet composition analysis due to the limitation of stable isotope mixing models (Hsu *et al.*, 2021). However, this may not be a major concern in our study because rice plants grow as dense clumps and form a complex structure that could substantially relax intra-guild predation pressure (Finke and Denno, 2006; Janssen *et al.*, 2007). Regardless, we caution that our diet estimates of predators (without predator-predator interference) might not apply to systems where intra-guild predation prevails.

5. Conclusions

While biocontrol has been recognized as a valuable tool for sustainable agriculture, whether generalist predators can serve as effective biocontrol agents in pest management remains unclear. Our study helps solve this long-standing puzzle by using stable isotope analysis to quantify the diet composition of GAPs and identifying the underlying mechanisms for enemy-pest interactions in rice farms over three consecutive years. The results show a high proportion of rice pests in GAPs' diets in both organic and conventional farms (e.g., 79-95% at the ripening

411 stage), suggesting that these generalist predators function as “specialist predators” at late crop
412 stages (when rice plants are fruiting and pests are abundant). The high pest consumption
413 remained consistent across years regardless of climatic conditions, demonstrating the potential
414 that generalist predators may produce a stable, predictable top-down effect on pests. Overall, our
415 study lends support to applying generalist predators as biocontrol agents in both organic and
416 conventional farms. As sustainable agriculture has become more important than ever in human
417 history, incorporating the ubiquitous generalist predators into pest management, such as
418 maintaining healthy populations of these predators, will likely open a promising avenue towards
419 this goal.

Funding

This work was supported by the Council of Agriculture, Executive Yuan, Taiwan (106AS-4.2.5-ST-a1, 107AS-4.2.3-ST-a1, 108AS-4.2.2-ST-a1, 109AS-4.2.2-ST-a1) and the National Science and Technology Council (108-2621-B-002-003-MY3, 111-2621-B-002-003-MY3).

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Acknowledgements

We thank Steven C. Pennings for constructive comments, and Yu-Pin Lin, Chih-Wei Tsai, Chi-Lun Huang, Su-Chen Chang, Hung-Ju Chen, C.-Y. Ho, F.-J. Sha, Y.-C. Chung, K.-C. Ho, and H.-C. Ho for logistic supports. We appreciate the Miaoli District Agricultural Research and Extension Station for field assistance.

Author contributions

All authors conducted the experiments; G.-C. Hsu and C.-K. Ho designed and wrote the manuscript; G.-C. Hsu and J.-A. Ou performed the statistical analyses.

Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary information associated with this article can be found in the online version at doi:xxx.

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604 **Table 1.** Statistical results from beta regression models for examining the effects of abiotic and
605 biotic factors on pest consumption by all predators, spiders, and ladybeetles. Interactions were
606 tested only between significant factors within each model.

Model	Factor	<i>d.f.</i>	χ^2	<i>P</i>
All predators	Year	2	1.99	0.37
	Farm type	1	15.98	< 0.001
	Crop stage	2	227.93	< 0.001
	Percent forest cover	1	0.30	0.58
	Relative abundance of rice herbivores	1	0.36	0.55
	Farm type × Crop stage	2	2.06	0.36
Spiders	Year	2	7.92	0.02
	Farm type	1	13.38	< 0.001
	Crop stage	2	115.43	< 0.001
	Percent forest cover	1	1.28	0.26
	Relative abundance of rice herbivores	1	1.38	0.24
	Year × Farm type	2	7.64	0.02
	Year × Crop stage	4	0.99	0.91
	Farm type × Crop stage	2	1.12	0.57
	Year × Farm type × Crop stage	4	0.44	0.98
Ladybeetles	Year	2	13.20	0.001
	Farm type	1	6.70	0.001
	Crop stage	2	152.60	< 0.001
	Percent forest cover	1	0.77	0.38
	Relative abundance of rice herbivores	1	0.93	0.33
	Year × Farm type	2	5.78	0.06
	Year × Crop stage	4	6.80	0.15
	Farm type × Crop stage	2	1.95	0.38
	Year × Farm type × Crop stage	4	2.37	0.67

607

Table 2. Tukey's post-hoc tests comparing the proportion of rice herbivores consumed in the diet of predators in organic and conventional rice farms. Different superscript letters indicate significant differences in the means ($\alpha = 0.05$) within each model.

Model	Farm type	Mean (\pm SE)	Lower 2.5%	Upper 2.5%
All predators	Organic	0.66 ^a (\pm 0.02)	0.63	0.69
	Conventional	0.73 ^b (\pm 0.01)	0.70	0.76
Spiders	Organic	0.64 ^a (\pm 0.02)	0.60	0.68
	Conventional	0.73 ^b (\pm 0.02)	0.69	0.77
Ladybeetles	Organic	0.86 ^a (\pm 0.01)	0.85	0.87
	Conventional	0.88 ^b (\pm 0.01)	0.87	0.89

Table 3. Tukey's post-hoc tests comparing the proportion of rice herbivores consumed in the diet of predators at three crop stages (tillering, flowering, and ripening stage). Different superscript letters indicate significant differences in the means ($\alpha = 0.05$) within each model.

Model	Crop stage	Mean (\pm SE)	Lower 2.5%	Upper 2.5%
All predators	Tillering	0.32 ^a (\pm 0.03)	0.27	0.38
	Flowering	0.84 ^b (\pm 0.02)	0.81	0.87
	Ripening	0.92 ^c (\pm 0.01)	0.90	0.95
Spiders	Tillering	0.35 ^a (\pm 0.04)	0.28	0.42
	Flowering	0.82 ^b (\pm 0.02)	0.78	0.86
	Ripening	0.89 ^b (\pm 0.02)	0.84	0.93
Ladybeetles	Tillering	0.82 ^a (\pm 0.01)	0.80	0.85
	Flowering	0.85 ^a (\pm 0.01)	0.84	0.87
	Ripening	0.94 ^b (\pm 0.01)	0.93	0.95

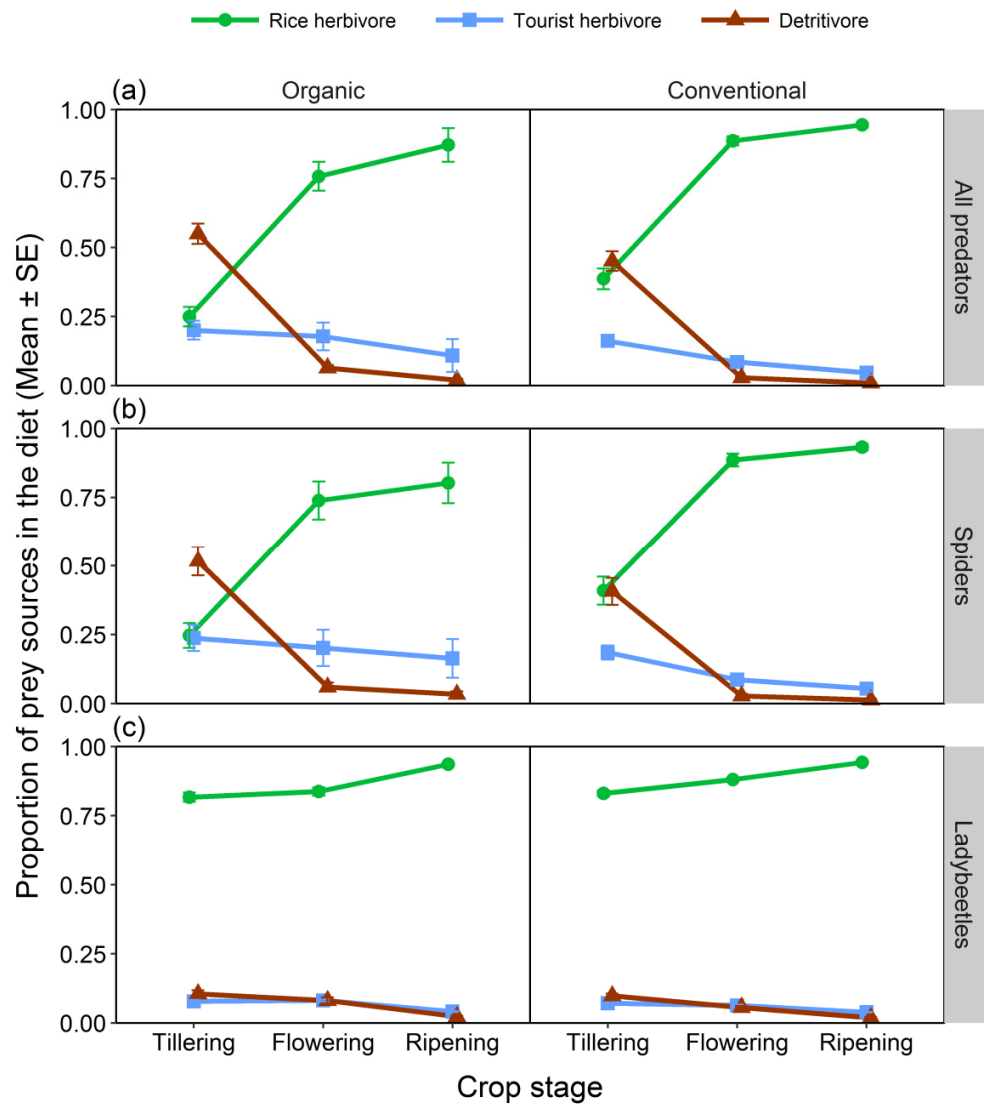
Figures (color should be used for Figure 1, 2, and 3)

Figure 1. The proportions (mean \pm SE) of prey sources (rice herbivores, tourist herbivores, and detritivores) consumed in the diet of (a) all predators, (b) spiders, and (c) ladybeetles in organic and conventional rice farms over crop stages. The proportions were computed from the Bayesian posterior means of replicate farms over three study years.

Figure 2. The proportion of rice herbivores consumed in the diet of (a) all predators, (b) spiders, and (c) ladybeetles in organic and conventional rice farms over crop stages in the three study years. The proportions were computed from the Bayesian posterior means of replicate farms.

Figure 3. The relative abundance of prey sources in organic and conventional rice farms over crop stages during the three study years. The relative abundance was determined from the sweep-net samples pooled across replicate farms.

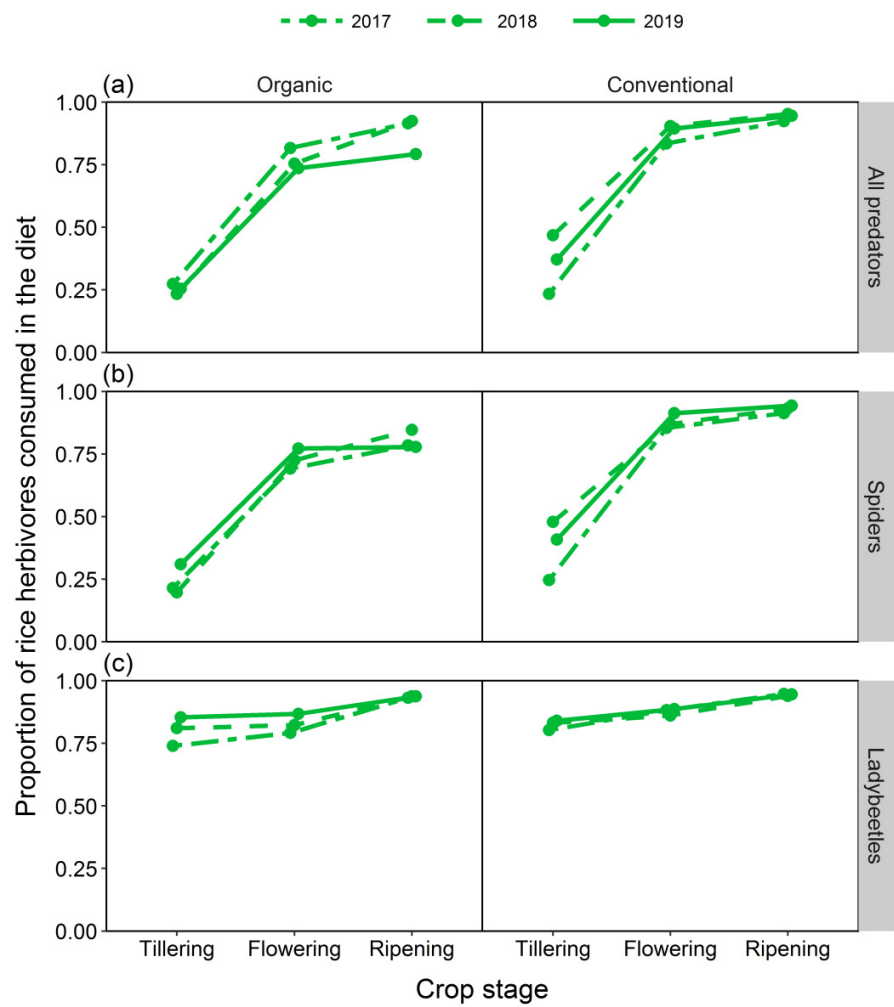
631 **Figure 1.**



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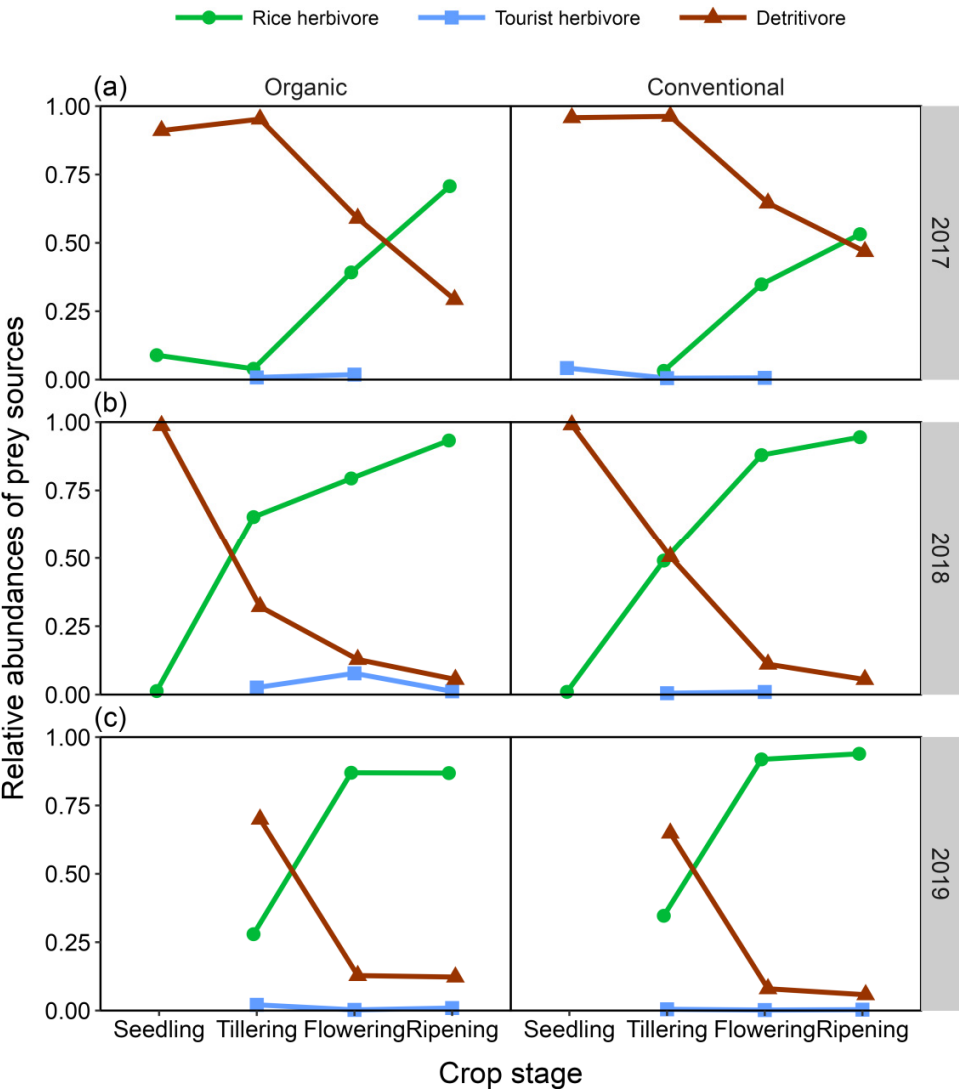
634 **Figure 2.**



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636

637 **Figure 3.**



638

Appendix A.

~~A predator in need is a predator indeed. generalist arthropod predators function as pest specialists at the late growth stage of rice~~

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16 **Table S1.** The taxonomic information and trophic guilds of the arthropod samples in the three
 17 study years.

18 (a) Year 2017

Trophic guild	Order	Family/Genus
Predators	Araneae	Araneidae
	Araneae	Clubionidae
	Araneae	Oxyopidae
	Araneae	Tetragnathidae/ <i>Tetragnatha</i>
	Araneae	Thomisidae
	Coleoptera	Carabidae
	Coleoptera	Coccinellidae
Rice herbivores	Hemiptera	Cicadellidae/ <i>Nephotettix</i>
	Hemiptera	Delphacidae/ <i>Nilaparvata</i>
	Hemiptera	Lygaeidae/ <i>Pachybrachius</i>
	Hemiptera	Pentatomidae/ <i>Scotinophara</i>
	Lepidoptera	Hesperiidae
	Lepidoptera	Pyralidae
	Lepidoptera	Nymphalidae
Tourist herbivores	Orthoptera	Pyrgomorphidae/ <i>Atractomorpha</i>
	Coleoptera	Chrysomelidae
Detritivores	Orthoptera	Acrididae
	Diptera	Chironomidae
	Diptera	Chloropidae
	Diptera	Ephydriidae
	Diptera	Muscidae
	Diptera	Sphaeroceridae
	Diptera	Stratiomyidae
	Diptera	Tephritidae

19		Orthoptera	Tetrigidae
20	(b) Year 2018		
		Trophic guild	Order
			Family/Genus
	Predators	Araneae	Araneidae
		Araneae	Clubionidae
		Araneae	Oxyopidae
		Araneae	Tetragnathidae/ <i>Tetragnatha</i>
		Araneae	Thomisidae
		Coleoptera	Coccinellidae
	Rice herbivores	Hemiptera	Alydidae/ <i>Leptocorisa</i>
		Hemiptera	Cicadellidae/ <i>Nephotettix</i>
		Hemiptera	Delphacidae/ <i>Nilaparvata</i>
		Hemiptera	Lygaeidae/ <i>Pachybrachius</i>
		Hemiptera	Pentatomidae/ <i>Scotinophara</i>
		Lepidoptera	Hesperiidae
		Lepidoptera	Pyalidae
		Orthoptera	Pyrgomorphidae/ <i>Atractomorpha</i>
	Tourist herbivores	Coleoptera	Chrysomelidae
		Orthoptera	Acrididae
	Detritivores	Diptera	Chironomidae
		Diptera	Chloropidae
		Diptera	Ephydriidae
		Diptera	Muscidae
		Diptera	Sciomyzidae
		Diptera	Stratiomyidae
		Orthoptera	Tetrigidae
21			
22	(c) Year 2019		

Trophic guild	Order	Family/Genus
Predators	Araneae	Araneidae
	Araneae	Clubionidae
	Araneae	Oxyopidae
	Araneae	Tetragnathidae/ <i>Tetragnatha</i>
	Araneae	Thomisidae
	Coleoptera	Coccinellidae
Rice herbivores	Diptera	Agromyzidae
	Hemiptera	Alydidae/ <i>Leptocorisa</i>
	Hemiptera	Cicadellidae/ <i>Nephotettix</i>
	Hemiptera	Coreidae
	Hemiptera	Delphacidae/ <i>Nilaparvata</i>
	Hemiptera	Lygaeidae/ <i>Pachybrachius</i>
	Hemiptera	Miridae
	Hemiptera	Pentatomidae/ <i>Scotinophara</i>
	Hemiptera	Ricaniidae
	Lepidoptera	Hesperiidae
	Lepidoptera	Nymphalidae
	Lepidoptera	Pyralidae
	Orthoptera	Pyrgomorphidae/ <i>Atractomorpha</i>
Tourist herbivores	Coleoptera	Chrysomelidae
	Orthoptera	Acrididae
Detritivores	Diptera	Calliphoridae
	Diptera	Chironomidae
	Diptera	Chloropidae
	Diptera	Ephydriidae
	Diptera	Lauxaniidae
	Diptera	Muscidae

Diptera	Phoridae
Diptera	Platystomatidae
Diptera	Sarcophagidae
Diptera	Sciomyzidae
Diptera	Sphaeroceridae
Diptera	Stratiomyidae
Diptera	Tephritidae
Orthoptera	Tetrigidae
Orthoptera	Tridactylidae

Table S2. The proportions (mean \pm SE) of prey sources (rice herbivores, tourist herbivores, detritivores) consumed in predators' diet in organic and conventional rice farms over crop stages in each study year. *n* represents the number of replicate farms for the diet estimation (Note that the differences in *n* within the same study year were due to the absence of predators in the sweep-net samples in some replicate farms).

Year	Farm type	Crop stage	Predator	Source			<i>n</i>
				Rice herbivore	Tourist herbivore	Detritivore	
2017	Organic	Tillering	All	0.27 \pm 0.08	0.19 \pm 0.05	0.54 \pm 0.12	3
			Spider	0.21 \pm 0.13	0.33 \pm 0.16	0.46 \pm 0.18	3
			Ladybeetle	0.74	0.09	0.17	1
		Flowering	All	0.82 \pm 0.04	0.13 \pm 0.04	0.05 \pm 0.03	3
			Spider	0.69 \pm 0.15	0.25 \pm 0.15	0.06 \pm 0.04	3
			Ladybeetle	0.79	0.09	0.12	1
		Ripening	All	0.92 \pm 0.02	0.07 \pm 0.02	0.02 \pm 0.01	3
			Spider	0.78 \pm 0.12	0.19 \pm 0.12	0.03 \pm 0.02	3
			Ladybeetle	0.93 \pm 0.01	0.04 \pm 0.01	0.03 \pm 0.01	3
	Conventional	Tillering	All	0.23 \pm 0.01	0.17 \pm 0.05	0.59 \pm 0.05	3
			Spider	0.25 \pm 0.01	0.2 \pm 0.06	0.55 \pm 0.08	3
			Ladybeetle	0.80	0.08	0.12	1
		Flowering	All	0.83 \pm 0.03	0.12 \pm 0.03	0.05 \pm 0.01	3
			Spider	0.85 \pm 0.02	0.11 \pm 0.03	0.04 \pm 0.01	3
			Ladybeetle	0.88 \pm 0.02	0.06 \pm 0.01	0.06 \pm 0.01	2
		Ripening	All	0.92 \pm 0.02	0.06 \pm 0.02	0.02 \pm 0.01	3
			Spider	0.91 \pm 0.01	0.07 \pm 0.02	0.02 \pm 0.01	3
			Ladybeetle	0.95 \pm 0.01	0.04 \pm 0.01	0.02 \pm 0.01	2
2018	Organic	Tillering	All	0.23 \pm 0.03	0.22 \pm 0.05	0.55 \pm 0.06	7
			Spider	0.20 \pm 0.02	0.28 \pm 0.07	0.52 \pm 0.07	7
			Ladybeetle	0.81 \pm 0.02	0.08 \pm 0.01	0.11 \pm 0.01	6
		Flowering	All	0.75 \pm 0.04	0.17 \pm 0.04	0.07 \pm 0.02	6
			Spider	0.73 \pm 0.07	0.20 \pm 0.07	0.08 \pm 0.04	5
			Ladybeetle	0.82 \pm 0.01	0.09 \pm 0.01	0.09 \pm 0.01	3

2019	Conventional	Ripening	All	0.92 ± 0.02	0.05 ± 0.01	0.02 ± 0.01	5
			Spider	0.85 ± 0.04	0.11 ± 0.03	0.05 ± 0.03	4
			Ladybeetle	0.94 ± 0.01	0.04 ± 0.01	0.02 ± 0.01	5
		Tillering	All	0.47 ± 0.07	0.15 ± 0.02	0.38 ± 0.05	7
			Spider	0.48 ± 0.10	0.19 ± 0.03	0.33 ± 0.08	7
			Ladybeetle	0.83 ± 0.02	0.07 ± 0.01	0.10 ± 0.01	4
		Flowering	All	0.90 ± 0.03	0.07 ± 0.02	0.02 ± 0.01	6
			Spider	0.87 ± 0.06	0.10 ± 0.04	0.03 ± 0.02	6
			Ladybeetle	0.86 ± 0.03	0.07 ± 0.01	0.07 ± 0.02	2
	Organic	Ripening	All	0.95 ± 0.01	0.04 ± 0.01	0.01 ± 0.01	7
			Spider	0.93 ± 0.05	0.06 ± 0.04	0.01 ± 0.01	2
			Ladybeetle	0.94 ± 0.01	0.04 ± 0.01	0.02 ± 0.01	5
		Tillering	All	0.25 ± 0.08	0.19 ± 0.06	0.55 ± 0.06	7
			Spider	0.31 ± 0.10	0.15 ± 0.06	0.54 ± 0.09	7
			Ladybeetle	0.85 ± 0.04	0.08 ± 0.01	0.07 ± 0.03	3
		Flowering	All	0.74 ± 0.12	0.20 ± 0.11	0.06 ± 0.01	7
			Spider	0.77 ± 0.15	0.18 ± 0.14	0.05 ± 0.02	6
			Ladybeetle	0.87 ± 0.02	0.07 ± 0.01	0.06 ± 0.02	3
	Conventional	Ripening	All	0.79 ± 0.16	0.19 ± 0.16	0.02 ± 0.01	5
			Spider	0.78 ± 0.17	0.19 ± 0.16	0.03 ± 0.01	5
			Ladybeetle	0.94 ± 0.01	0.04 ± 0.01	0.02 ± 0.01	5
		Tillering	All	0.37 ± 0.04	0.17 ± 0.04	0.46 ± 0.06	7
			Spider	0.41 ± 0.06	0.17 ± 0.05	0.42 ± 0.08	7
			Ladybeetle	0.84 ± 0.01	0.07 ± 0.01	0.09 ± 0.01	2
		Flowering	All	0.89 ± 0.02	0.08 ± 0.02	0.03 ± 0.01	7
			Spider	0.91 ± 0.02	0.06 ± 0.02	0.02 ± 0.01	7
			Ladybeetle	0.89 ± 0.01	0.06 ± 0.01	0.05 ± 0.01	6
		Ripening	All	0.95 ± 0.01	0.05 ± 0.01	0.01 ± 0.01	5
			Spider	0.94 ± 0.02	0.05 ± 0.02	0.01 ± 0.01	5
			Ladybeetle	0.95 ± 0.01	0.04 ± 0.01	0.02 ± 0.01	3

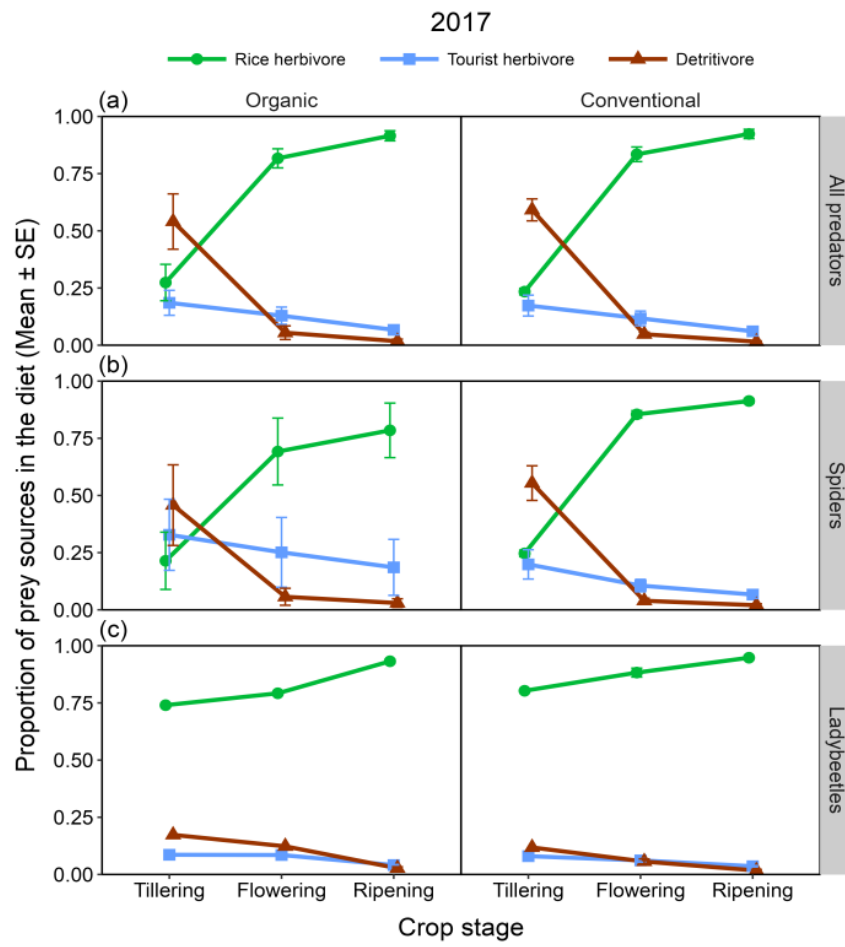
Table S3. The relative abundance of the major families/genera in rice herbivore guild at the flowering and ripening stages in the three study years. Samples were pooled across the replicate farms.

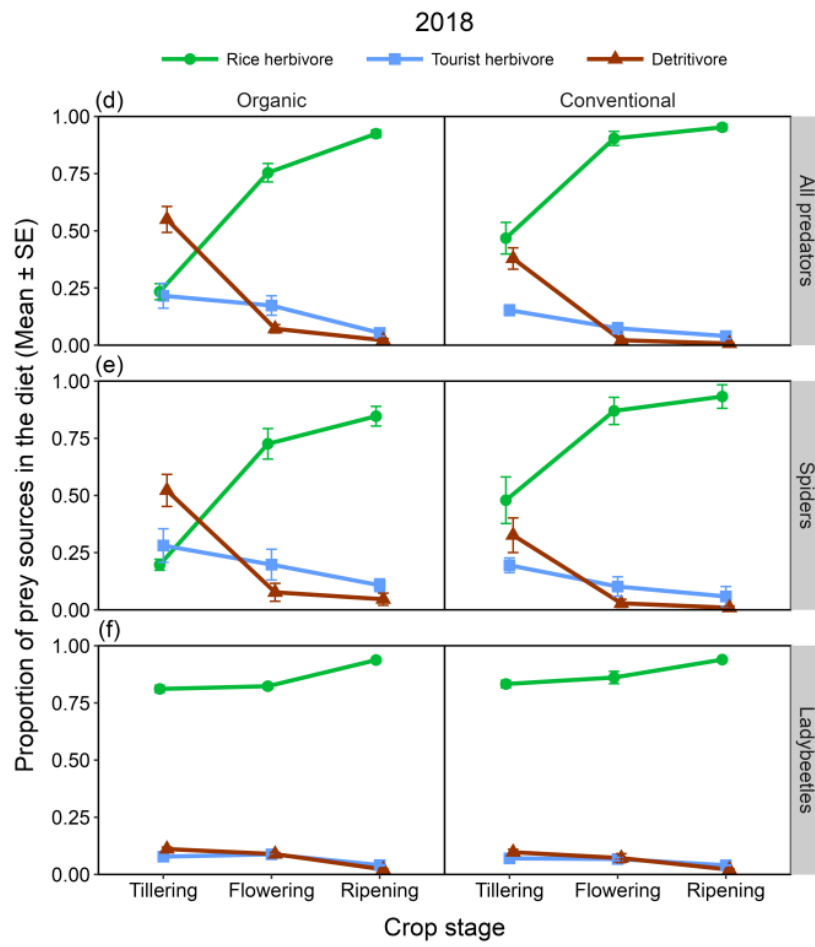
(a) Flowering stage

Family/Genus	Year 2017	Year 2018	Year 2019
Cicadellidae/ <i>Nephotettix</i>	7.6%	22.5%	69.7%
Delphacidae/ <i>Nilaparvata</i>	88.2%	71.9%	25.4%
Lygaeidae/ <i>Pachybrachius</i>	NA	0.8%	1.3%
Pentatomidae/ <i>Scotinophara</i>	0.8%	2.9%	0.8%
Others	3.4%	1.9%	2.8%
<i>Total</i>	100%	100%	100%

(b) Ripening stage

Family/Genus	Year 2017	Year 2018	Year 2019
Cicadellidae/ <i>Nephotettix</i>	69.4%	74.9%	83.5%
Delphacidae/ <i>Nilaparvata</i>	28.9%	13.4%	6.2%
Lygaeidae/ <i>Pachybrachius</i>	NA	0.2%	4.1%
Pentatomidae/ <i>Scotinophara</i>	1.7%	10.4%	4.5%
Others	NA	1.1%	1.7%
<i>Total</i>	100%	100%	100%





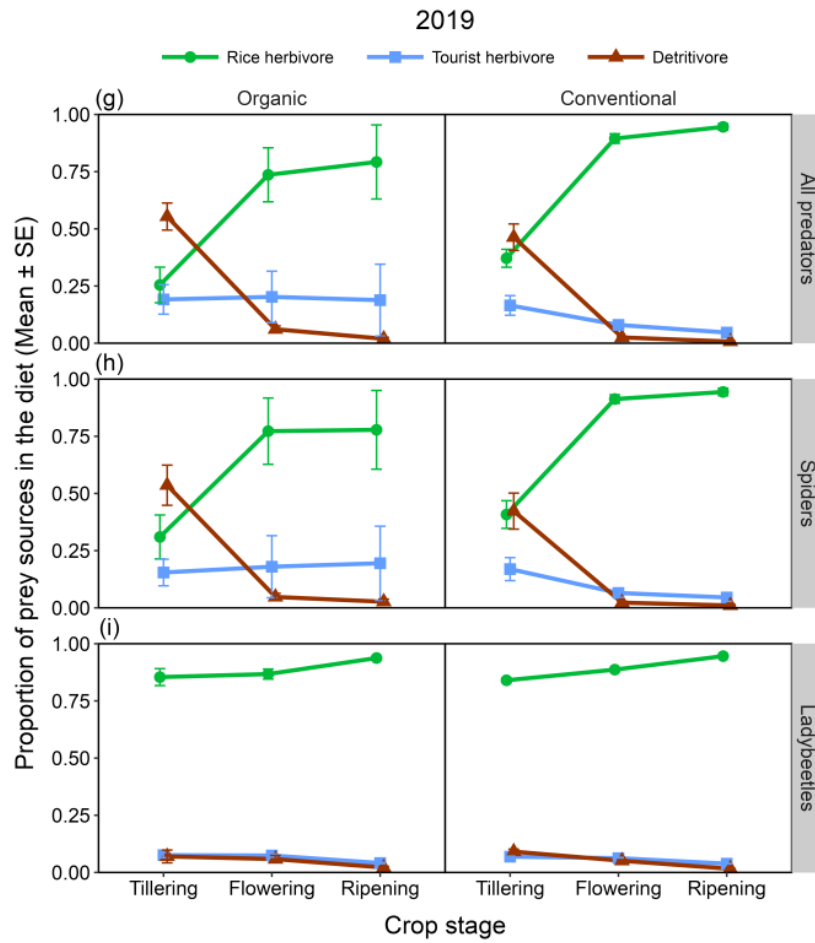


Figure S1. The proportions (mean \pm SE) of prey sources (rice herbivores, tourist herbivores, detritivores) consumed in the diet of predators in organic and conventional rice farms over crop stages in each study year: (a), (d), and (g) indicate all predators as a whole feeding guild; (b), (e), and (h) indicate spiders; (c), (f), and (i) indicate ladybeetles. The proportions were computed from the Bayesian posterior means of replicate farms.

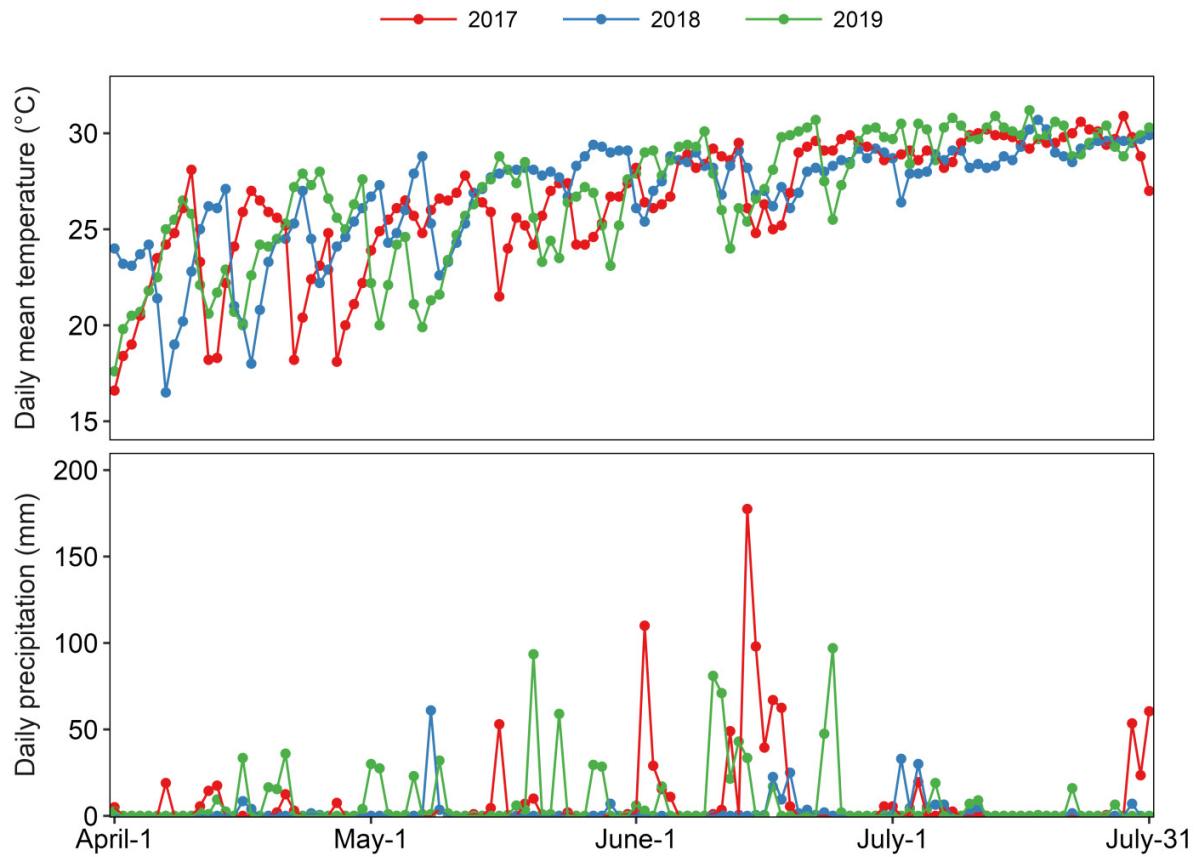


Figure S2. Daily mean temperature and precipitation of the study sites during the rice growth season (April to July) of the three study years. Observation data from the closest local weather station (Yuanli station) to the study farms were retrieved from the Central Weather Bureau Observation Data Inquire System (<https://e-service.cwb.gov.tw/HistoryDataQuery/index.jsp>).

Declaration of interests

☒The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

☐The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: